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ABSTRACT

The Internet is a powerful tool for language teaching. Web-based student projects can motivate students to study English. A Web project is an assignment in which students make a Web page and post it online for other people to read or see. This type of project is good for promoting cultural awareness and improving students' writing and presentation skills. Advantages of such projects include the following: students use English for real communication, Web page projects are a flexible assignment, and Web page projects promote collaboration. Disadvantages include these: students' knowledge of the Internet and computers can vary significantly, which makes it difficult to complete a project, and students may be inexperienced in working on a project in which they must select a topic; gather resources; read about the topic; select, organize, and synthesize information; and present a final product. The three basic types of Web projects are writing essays, making links pages for a subject, and a combination of the two. Projects may include photos, maps, illustrations, or links. Topics are usually the student's own culture, another culture, or a comparison of two cultures. This paper presents examples of Web-based projects and offers details on specific assignments. (SM)

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Web-based Students' Projects: Teaching Awareness of Culture and Writing

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Introduction

The Internet is a useful and powerful tool for language teaching. Among the various activities that make use of the Internet, web-based student projects are especially useful in motivating students to study English. A web project is an assignment in which students make a webpage and post it online for other people to read or see.

This type of project is also good for teaching awareness of culture and improving students' writing, as well as their skills at presenting information. Such an assignment also helps students develop Internet skills such as making webpages and using search engines. In this paper, I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such projects, review some examples, explain how to set up such projects successfully, and provide some useful Internet resources on a support webpage.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Web Projects

Depending on the exact conditions of the assignment, web projects may have a variety of advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

The biggest advantage of this project is that students use English for real communication, and develop an understanding of communication from the viewpoint of both reader and writer. Students must learn to analyze their audience, considering what their audience may or may not know about the subject. A webpage assignment can involve research both on and off the Internet, writing material for the pages, and reading and answering responses to the pages sent in by readers.

Student-made webpages are a flexible assignment. They can be done on a wide variety of subjects, depending on the interests of the students (Gitsaki & Taylor, 2000; Warschauer et al., 2000). For English language students, subjects related to various national cultures are particularly appropriate (Johnson, 2001). For example, students can make webpages with information about English-speaking countries to help them learn about such cultures. They can also do webpages about Japan, to learn to explain Japanese culture to English speakers. Webpage assignments can be adjusted to suit a variety of levels of English proficiency.

Webpage projects are a good collaborative assignment. It is easy for students to help one another study English. They can work in pairs or groups. They can learn through the comments their peers make and through cooperation with them.

Finally, students can develop basic skills in using the Internet and computers. They can learn to use search engines and make HTML files.

Disadvantages

The main disadvantage is that students' knowledge of the Internet and computers varies a great deal, and it may be difficult to carry out a given project. Very few students have experience of making HTML files.

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Students may not have experience of working on a project in which they must choose a topic, gather resources, read about the topic, select, organize, and synthesize useful information, and present the final product effectively. Students may lack the skills that they will need to carry out such a project, such as using search engines efficiently, or writing explanations or essays in English. Students may need help from the teacher at various stages of the project.

This is not an easy assignment. However, all aspects of the project—with the possible exception of making HTML files—involve skills that are, in any case, essential for university students today. Making HTML files is also useful for study and work, and making simple ones is not difficult if proper instruction and clear examples are given.

Review of Similar Projects

A number of teachers throughout the world have made use of webpages to display their students' projects. For example, see: *Students' Web Projects* at:

- http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/japanese/online/project.html

In this section of the paper, I will briefly discuss a few of these.

Sperling's project

Dave Sperling had students interview each other and write brief biographies for a composition course:

http://www.csun.edu/~hcesl004/CSUN.html

While this allows students to see their work on the Internet, it is a useful resource only for classmates.

Nakata's project

Nakata did "Show and tell" for a web project in a junior high school class:

http://www.educa.nagoya-u.ac.jp/huzoku/n02.html

It is an easy project for any English class. Students provide one or more photos and explain them in writing.

Ozeki's project

Ozeki Shuji maintains a webpage that includes the topics "Studying Abroad," "Japanese Traditional Culture," "Japanese Food," and others:

http://www.intl.chubu.ac.jp/ozeki/ngu2000/miniBBS/

This page also has a form encouraging anyone to post their own writing on these topics, along with pictures, if they wish.

Robb's projects

Tom Robb has had his students do a number of web projects based on explaining Japanese culture:

http://www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/~trobb/

Two of these are a Famous Japanese Personages Project (Robb, 2000) and a Kyoto Restaurant Project. The personages project has brief biographies of famous modern Japanese people, divided into categories according to their fields. The restaurant project has information about restaurants in Kyoto, with maps and illustrations. Each of the projects is well organized and provides a useful resource to readers outside the course. Students' email addresses, posted on many of the pages, allow readers to respond.

Oguri's projects

Oguri Seiko made "Writing about Japan," where students write about different aspects of Japanese culture under the categories of "School," "Home," "Society," "Traditions," "Food," and "Seasons":

http://www-clc.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/oguri/japan/write_jpn.html

This is a potential resource for foreigners wishing to learn about Japan, or Japanese interested in how Japanese culture can be described in English.

Oguri has another project where students write about their intercultural experiences:

http://langue.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/seiko/xculture94.html

This is interesting for its descriptions of cultural differences from the viewpoint of Japanese students.

Vilmi's projects

Ruth Vilmi of Helsinki University of Technology has a webpage with students' essays on aspects of Finnish culture:

http://www.ruthvilmi.net/hut/Project/Culture/

There are also a few student web presentations based on surveys of other classes. These are an interesting resource for any readers interested in Finnish culture, but they would be still more useful if the topics were categorized.

Tanaka's projects

Students of Tanaka Kazue did an interesting project on cross-cultural topics:

http://www.tokujo.ac.jp/Tanaka/Kazue/kazue.html

They interviewed people in different cultures by email gathered related Internet resources. While this project makes good use of the Internet, and allows students to communicate with people of different cultures, unfortunately, the students' web pages are in Japanese only.

Hurst's project

One of the more creative projects is by students of Lilliam Hurst of Collège Claparède in Geneva:

http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/exchange/projects/geneva1.html

This project, for a literature course, involved reading the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and writing letters. Students either wrote letters to the characters in the play, offering sympathy for their situations, giving advice, etc., or wrote letters that the characters themselves might have written. This seems to be a useful way to help students understand the characters in a literary work.

Web Projects

There are basically three types of web projects: essay writing, making links pages for a subject, or a combination of these two. Projects may include photos, maps, illustrations, or links.

The topics of the projects are usually the students' own culture, another culture, or a comparison of their own culture and another. The first type is the most common, but they can all be interesting and useful for English language students.

There are different levels of sophistication. The simplest projects are just a webpage with students' short writings, some of which have involved gathering information. The most sophisticated ones include research and extensive writing in English, pictures, etc.

As students carry out these assignments, among the skills they develop are searching for resources on the Internet, gathering information, reading English, selecting information and classifying it, writing in English, thinking in English, organizing information, describing or explaining resources, presenting information in a way readers can easily understand, audience analysis, communicating with other group members or readers by email, peer work, and writing HTML. Students handle Internet related work well if they are given well-organized instruction. This project can generate a great many language activities in English, and students will both use and be exposed to English in the context of working on a task of interest to them.

Procedures for the Project

In this section, I will discuss the specific assignments with some suggestions. I will explain how I have administered this type of project, demonstrate some parts of a project, and display the final projects and materials I have used for them:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/material/project/

Essay type

The easiest project involves writing something short, concrete, and interesting for both writer and readers, and making a good database. The teacher should give students guidelines for writing together with a sample. The important point is that students write something meaningful for whoever might read it. For evaluation purposes, I use *Paragraph Evaluation*:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/project/paragraph.html

and *Project Evaluation*:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/project/project.html

for paragraphs and essays, respectively.

Class Practice

The web project can be used for peer work or class administration. Students write short self-introductions, information from interviews with classmates, or on any assigned topic. Classmates can read the essays, help the writers improve them, ask questions, and otherwise communicate with the writer. The class as a whole can also use the essays as topics for class discussion:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/cai/

This type of project might be posted on the Internet, since their purpose is class discussion and participation.

Book descriptions: Descriptions of books are good for this type of project, especially in conjunction with a reading course. For this project, the teacher should explain what should be included in the book report, and give students an example, such as *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication* at:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/library/resource/intercultural/masante.html

or *Books on Japan*, at:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/japanese/library/resource/book/japan.html

Students can choose a book, read it, and write a description, including details of target audience, purpose, content, and scope of the book, and the student's opinion of it. The teacher can comment on the book reports, and students can correct them. This database can help other students choose books to read.

Term papers: Teachers upload student term papers. The teacher should make it clear that the papers will be uploaded, and thus might be read by many people. Depending on the goals and format of the course, the papers can be discussed as students work on them, or students can just turn in final papers. I have made links pages to papers my own students have written, at:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/meta/1999s/

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/project/2001/meta/comm.html

and

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/meta/

University project: Students can do a webpage about their own university. They can choose from a variety of topics related to the university. Information may be available through university literature, the university webpage, university offices, etc. However, the main task should be writing.

When I did this project with students at Doshisha University, I took a process writing approach. I had students write a paragraph on their chosen topic, and then expand it into several paragraphs. Each student read four essays, and emailed the writers questions about what more they wanted to know. Students then rewrote their essays in response to these questions. Each student then read another four essays, and emailed the writers comments about how the essays could be improved. Students then rewrote the essays again. The course concluded with oral presentations of the papers. The web projects, *Essays about Doshisha University*, can be seen at:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/project/2000/doshisha.html

Japanese culture project: This is a more ambitious project. In my own students' case, such a project involved a process writing approach over a whole semester. See:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/project/2000/japan.html

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/d410/

and

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/essay/

Students were instructed to choose a topic on Japanese culture in general, or on Kyoto, the ancient city where Doshisha University is located.

This was a highly structured project in which students were given instructions, first, for choosing topics, doing research and writing an introductory or topic paragraphs; then, for writing an outline, writing the whole essay, and, finally, editing. They were given a specific task every week, and a strict schedule for the project. They were required to use at least three references. During the project, students worked together asking questions, making suggestions for improving each others' writing, and correcting each others' errors.

Link type

In making a links page, students focus on one topic with a number of subtopics. They gather links for each subtopic using search engines, other links pages or net surfing. They add a brief description and/or comments to each link. Students enjoy doing this, and they sometimes make useful pages, as well as develop good web searching skills. However, the teacher must encourage efficiency; otherwise, students may waste time and energy. Some examples using AltaVista, can be found in *Searching for Information on the Internet*:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/project/searching.html

Using AltaVista:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/project/AltaVista.html

and *Evaluating Internet Resources*:
http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/project/evaluating.html

As a practical matter, it is important to separate English and Japanese web links, as non-Japanese generally use browsers which cannot read Japanese characters.

Combination type

This type of project involves making a links page with an introduction and a conclusion, or a description and explanation, of the links page, including the purpose, targeted audience, contents, organization, how to use it, etc. The teacher should spend one class explaining how to do the project, and give examples. The teacher should check on students' work periodically, and after the project is finished, students may each give a presentation of his or her own page. Examples of combination type projects follow.

Study abroad: The purpose of this type of project is to make webpages about a certain university for students who might be interested in studying there. First, students choose webpages about the university, the country, city and/or region, transportation, etc. Then, they compile a brief facts page, with enrollment, number of faculty, ratio of faculty to students, tuition, campus size, etc. Students must consult many webpages, and read and evaluate them, in order to select the best ones. Finally, they describe each site briefly in English, and write an introductory page. See examples at:

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/practicum/

and

http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/2000/s/practicum/project/

Culture projects and visiting country projects: The basic procedures are the same as for the study abroad pages. It is important that students decide for themselves how best to organize the page, and then write an introduction explaining how the page is organized, and how it can be used effectively. See:
http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/meta/f/
http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/meta00/
and *Intercultural Communication*:
http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/class/special/

Conclusion

As explained above, web based projects are flexible and suitable for students of diverse proficiency. They are easily implemented inside and outside the classroom. Students may increase cultural understanding and develop English writing skills through reading and thinking in English. They may also learn valuable research and Internet skills.

Notes

A support page for this paper is available at:
http://ilc2.doshisha.ac.jp/users/kkitao/library/article/call/web-based2.html
This includes all the links to websites cited in this paper, together with others useful for this type of project, such as writing on the web, search engines sites, and information on various cultures.

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